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AUTHOR Harrison, Elisabeth
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ABSTRACT

This report examined the role of race in the graduate school experiences of black doctoral graduates from a predominantly white institution and focused on their coping strategies. Data from surveys of and interviews with black graduates indicated that despite efforts to recruit black students, changing the mindset of those whites who were resistant to their presence on campus was an ongoing problem that black students had to cope with in various ways. Nearly one-third reported race-related difficulties, though they did not allow the difficulties to become major impediments to their educational pursuit. Some experienced unfair treatment, denial of opportunity, and underestimation of their abilities. Connectedness (e.g., to family, peers, faculty, and God) was an important coping skill. Respondents also coped by developing their skills as writers, researchers, educators, scientists, leaders, and clinicians. An important goal was to make a difference in the quality of their lives and in the lives of others. They realized the importance of their undertaking to black people past, present, and future and were willing to make sacrifices in order to succeed. Respondents believed in their abilities and achieved their academic goals by staying focused. (Contains 19 references.) (SM)

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BLACK DOCTORAL GRADUATES FROM A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITY

DR. ELISABETH HARRISON
TUSKEGEE UNIVERSITY
TUSKEGEE, ALABAMA

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Black Doctoral Graduates From a Predominantly White University

Understanding the experiences of Black scholars at predominantly White institutions is essential as mainstream American colleges and universities seek to increase minority populations on their campuses and as some Blacks students consider embarking on doctoral programs at predominantly White institutions. This study examines the role of race in the graduate school experiences of Black doctoral graduates from a predominantly White institution and the coping strategies they employed to complete the doctorate.

African Americans and Graduate Education

Graduate education for African Americans was virtually nonexistent during the first half of the twentieth century. Until the mid-twentieth century, no historically Black college offered a doctoral degree in a discipline in the arts and sciences (Blackwell, 1987). With the exception of Yale, Harvard, the University of Wisconsin and a few

other institutions, no graduate or professional training was available to Blacks at historically White institutions (Willie, et al., 1991). In theory the accessibility of graduate education for Blacks improved after the 1954 Brown decision and the enabling federal legislation in the 1960s. Blackwell (1987) reports, however, that as a result of the historical patterns of segregation, discrimination, and racism, at no time between 1950 and 1969 "did the number of African American Ph.D.s rise above 1% of all doctorate holders in the labor force" (p. 327).

The response of educational institutions to the Civil Rights movement, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s was successful, at least in the short run. With the attack on exclusionary barriers, the 1970s witnessed an increase in the numbers and proportion of doctorates awarded to Blacks. The commitment to increasing educational opportunities for minority groups lost momentum, however, during the late 1970s through the late 1980s as we witnessed a decline in the number of doctorates awarded to Blacks. Though the early 1990s showed an increase, the disproportionate number of African

Americans who complete doctoral programs is cause for concern as America begins a new century still struggling with issues of racial equity in higher education.

Black Graduate Students on White Campuses

Studies produced during the 1980s and 1990s examine the African American graduate school experience in light of the declining enrollment of Blacks in graduate and professional programs. These studies identify issues of social integration and experiences of racism as two of a number of key differences in the graduate school experience for Black vs. White students attempting to find their way within White academe.

Social Integration

Social integration, as explained by Gottlieb (1981), refers to "people's involvement with the institutions, voluntary associations, and informal social life of their communities" (p. 32). In a 1986 study, DeFour found that students who were more socially integrated into their academic departments were less likely to have thoughts about dropping out of school. However, a number of studies identified social integration as a problem identified

by Black graduate students. In a 1982 study surveying the characteristics, experiences, and aspirations of over 400 African American graduate students in six state-supported predominantly White universities, Allen reported that African American graduate students "...seem not to be thoroughly integrated into the social life of their respective schools" (p. 4). Allen found that only 20 percent felt a sense of belonging to their campus; 58 percent responded that professors sometimes invited black students to participate in research projects, and nearly 25 percent said it never occurred. Fifty-one percent reported that their White colleagues sometimes avoided social interaction with them, and 34 percent reported that this occurred often.

In a 1982 study examining race consciousness and achievement in Black graduate students at six predominantly White colleges and universities (PWCUs), Hall and Allen found that 45 percent of Black graduate students felt that their professors sometimes avoided interactions with Black students outside the classroom. One quarter of the students felt that faculty never involved Black students in research projects and activities. Over one

third felt that their professors never offered Black students' opportunities to gain experience as teaching assistants or instructors.

Studies by Baird (1974), Duncan, (1976) and Willie, Grady and Hope (1991) found that minorities in White institutions reported smaller percentages of mentor/mentee relationships as part of their graduate school experience than White students. The data suggest poor social involvement for Black graduate students at majority White institutions.

Racism and the Graduate School Experience

Racism makes social integration within academe almost impossible. Benjamin (1991) defines racism as "a process of justification for the domination, exploitation, and control of one racial group by another. It incorporates a set of attitudes and beliefs to support the dominant group's discriminatory behavior" (p. xxvii). Racism is a painful reality of American society and persists as a major barrier to minority advancement (Blandin, 1994).

A number of studies reported experiences of racism as part of the Black graduate students' academic

experiences. Allen (1982) reported that Black graduate students found that some White faculty members experienced discomfort in dealing with Black students. "This discomfort gets translated into an apparent reluctance to work with Black students, as well as subtle discriminatory acts toward Black students" (p. 10). Students in Allen's study cited the following examples: "Several professors expressed surprise, disbelief regarding my writing ability ('You really write well. Did you write this? It's so articulate.')"; "Teacher who was always too busy to help me or answer questions about the class work, yet found time for White students" (p. 7). Pruitt and Issac (1988) found that dissertation topics that focus on minority issues, which many Black doctoral students pursue, were not well received. "White faculty commonly characterize such interests as unworthy, an attitude that, when added to the usual environment pressures, make graduate school intolerable. Some students withdraw psychologically and ultimately drop out" (p. 535).

In his examination of factors that contribute to African American graduate students' decisions to forego

doctoral studies at two predominantly White institutions. Stanley (1990) found that experiences with racial discrimination was the most significant factor in African American students' decision to forego the pursuit of the doctoral degree.

The Institution and the Participants

The population examined in this study is Black doctoral graduates from a large predominantly White, research and land grant university in the southeastern United States. The graduates attended the university from 1959 to 1995. Though the study focused on American born persons of African descent, the experiences of foreign-born Blacks were also examined.

Founded in the late 18th century, the university is often referred to as the flagship university of the state system; it had a student population of approximately 25,000 as of 1995. The African American student population was about 1,200 or 5 percent of the total student population. Though the university admitted it's first Black

graduate student in 1952, it was not officially integrated until the early 1960s.

The university has a strong athletic tradition, housing one of the largest Division I athletic programs in the country. Like other similar institutions, the major sports teams are now made up predominantly of Black students, a situation not reflected in any other aspect of university life.

Methodology

The study was a qualitative inquiry that used both a questionnaire and open-ended interviews to gain insight into the subjective educational experiences of the participants. Qualitative method in the broadest sense "refers to research that produces descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior" (Taylor and Bogden, 1984, p. 5). Questionnaires were used to obtain demographic data as well as ask initial questions about the graduate school experience. Interviews were conducted as follow-ups on the questionnaire responses and to further probe the experiences of the participants. Learning of their experiences from their perspectives and

using their voices, the study identified, among other things, the personal characteristics that were instrumental in the doctoral graduates' success.

Data were analyzed using the hermeneutic process of examining text, allowing for the identification of the common structures of experience (Kvale, 1996). The interpretation of data yielded themes, concepts and patterns in capturing the doctoral graduates' educational experiences.

Design

Because the university had not maintained official records of its graduates by race and ethnicity until 1988, the names of the Black doctoral recipients and their addresses were obtained from a number of sources including: the university's professors, the Office of Student Data, the Black Alumni Association, the university historian, the Black doctoral graduates, the university's alumni association, the National Directory of College Professors and telephone directories of US cities. Based on the information provided by all sources, 224 Blacks, both

American and foreign-born, completed their doctorates at the university between 1959 and 1995. Addresses were found for 197 of the 224 doctoral graduates and a questionnaire was mailed to each graduate. Eighty-seven completed questionnaires were returned for a 44 percent return rate. The respondents were also asked in the questionnaire whether or not they would agree to a follow-up interview.

Forty-five women and forty-three men completed the questionnaires. The respondents represented the major academic programs across four decades, from the 1960s to the 1990s. The completed questionnaires were examined and the responses were used as data for developing probing questions that were asked during the follow-up interviews. Seventy-eight respondents agreed to interviews, however, only 48 interviews were conducted. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) explain that, ideally, data collection should stop when successive examination of sources yields redundancy (p. 132). Subsequent interviews provided no new data after about the 40th interview.

Each interviewee was mailed a copy of their transcribed interview and was asked to review the transcript to ensure accuracy. Twenty-three transcripts were returned with minor editing. Three people omitted portions of their transcripts.

Findings

Generalized Difficulties

Among the difficulties experienced by students regardless of race were the challenges and personal sacrifices associated with completing the doctoral degree. One woman described one of the challenges she experienced during the process. Describing her committee as "a pretty good bunch of folk," she found that "they didn't always think alike."

> *One day I was on campus and I went to see each one individually. I had a question about what test to apply to my data. I went to see five different people and at the end of the day I had five different answers. I said "Lord have mercy!"*

Another participant was caught in the midst of departmental infighting. He explained:

> *There were guys on my committee who didn't like each other. Guess who became the lightning rod for all of their frustration and anger; I did.... When I would meet with them one would praise me for something I had done and the other guy would criticize me and vice versa. I found out it wasn't me; they simply disliked each other.*

In addition to the challenges associated with the academic process, the participants and their families made personal sacrifices. Adding the role of student to other adult responsibilities was stressful. As one participant explained: "My challenges involved balancing family, work and school." Another wrote: "My challenges related to being a wife and mother and living apart from my family."

Race Related Difficulties

Approximately one third of the graduates reported having experienced race related difficulties in the process of pursuing the doctorate. The incidents usually left the students feeling hurt, angry and, in some cases, confused. In a study examining the concept of Everyday Racism, defined as "the integration of racism into everyday situations...", Essed (1991) explains that everyday racism is played out through the processes of marginalization,

containment and problematization (p. 50). These processes "mutually stimulate and sustain each other" (p. 114). Problematization serves to rationalize the marginalization of Blacks, while containment serves to keep Blacks subjugated. For the Black doctoral graduates, some of the manifestations of these processes were unfair treatment, underestimation of abilities, and denial of opportunities by White professors and students.

Unfair Treatment

Some of the graduates experienced unfair treatment. One woman was given a lower final grade than her study partner, a White man, but had a higher point total for the class. Both she and her White classmate talked with the professor to point out the error. He acknowledged the error, but did not change the grade. She explained: "He told me that he could not do that 'because it's very difficult, it's too difficult to change a B+ to an A, so he would rather just leave it." She explained, "I didn't worry about it. But, I did tell him, 'You know if you had been fair in the beginning this wouldn't have happened.' " He offered her no response and never changed the grade. Another participant fulfilled

all the requirements to receive an A in a course, but received a B. He confronted the professor, as he explains: "...without any argument, I told him how I felt. He looked at me and said, 'Oh, I didn't know you were interested in an A. Okay, I'll change it.' "

As a process of containment, unfair treatment placed impediments to the graduates' pursuit of their academic goals.

Underestimation

Underestimation of abilities was another racial indignity. As one woman explained:

> *There were always expectations by some faculty that minority students could not or would not excel as majority students, so one always had to go the extra mile to prove oneself or to be accepted.*

When a Black student's academic and intellectual abilities were incongruent with the assumptions held by Whites, the reaction was one of surprise. Participants reported that their abilities were questioned, especially their writing skills. After turning in the first draft of her dissertation, one woman learned that her committee chair questioned whether she actually did the writing: "He expressed (to at

least one other committee member) concern that the first draft of my dissertation was 'too clean' and wondered who may have done it for me."

One African graduate told of a discussion he had with some White classmates about race issues.

> *When they wanted to talk about it [race issues] they would look at me and say, "Well, you're Black, but you're not Black." They do that when they are about to talk down on Black Americans...." I tell them, we are all Black. Don't say that to try to make me feel good." They would comment, "Well you work hard, you work very hard, you are smart.... Some of them [Black Americans] come here without having the qualifications." I tell them, "That's not true. I have taken classes with most of you and I know how you perform.*

Essed (1991) explains, "historically the idea of White intellectual superiority has been one of the most persistent features of Euro-American ideologies on race" (p. 232). This underestimation of intellectual abilities represents the process of marginalization. The participants in this study seemed to confirm this notion as they spoke of their experiences at the university.

Denial of Opportunities

The denial of opportunity to Black students was another obstacle some of the participants faced. One man wanted to complete a second Ph.D. in a field of study related to that of his first doctorate. He was denied the opportunity to complete the degree for reasons he later found had to do with his race.

> *I told them I was interested in getting a Ph.D. in that department...They said I needed 24 hours for a second Ph.D., then they said I needed to take comprehensives [exams] to pursue the Ph.D. in their department...I took the comprehensive exams. There were three of us. When the results came out, I was the only one who did well. The other two people had marginal pass and they were majors in that area. Despite my performance on the comprehensive exam, despite the fact that I completed all of the core courses in the program, they turned me down with no justification. But one of them (a White professor in that department) told me in confidence that I was denied the chance to pursue the second Ph.D. because of my race. He even encouraged me to sue.*

Some White professors and students questioned the participants' skills and abilities and sought to exclude the Black students from full participation in the education process. Essed (1991) explains that underestimation of

Blacks by Whites "is a crucial legitimization of the continuing exclusion of Blacks from fair access to and use of resources" (p. 232).

The graduates experienced various forms of racism during their doctoral programs. Their responses to these incidents varied according to how much the incidents violated the participants' sense of self. Both African-American and foreign-born Blacks reported experiences of racism. While the African Americans were well schooled in the politics of race in America, the experience of racism for the foreign born Blacks in this study was often a new one.

Coping

In understanding what helped the graduates to stay on course and to complete the degree, the graduates both American and foreign-born spoke of coping resources that are organized around two themes; a strong sense of self and of connectedness. The psychological concept of Optimal Theory provides a framework for understanding the participants coping resources. Optimal theory assumes the importance of spirituality, highlights the strong sense of

connection to others and assumes self worth is intrinsic, independent of external form (Myers and Speight, 1994).

Connectedness

Connectedness refers to the relationships that were essential to their psychological and social well being. Spirituality, their relationship with God, was a reflection of their deep spiritual values. One woman explained: "My continued connection with God, my faith, His grace and mercy – brought me through some dark times!" The graduates spoke of how their spiritual beliefs helped to inform their responses to the difficulties they faced as part of the graduate school process. One participant explained:

> *My religious beliefs colored my thinking about what strategies I would use to make it through the program...There were times, many times, when I thought that either because of something that was going on, or competing agendas in my life, that I just wouldn't be able to make it. God just always renewed my strength.*

Myers et al., (1991) explains that spirituality is "a way of being and experiencing that come through awareness of a transcendent dimension." (p. 57). Identified as an essential aspect of the optimal framework of identity

development, spirituality allows people to transcend the conflicts in society.

The participants identified relationships with others as connections that helped them in the process of obtaining the degree. Their families supported the graduates early in life by stressing the importance of education and developing in them a love for learning. Even though family members did not always understand the process or, in some cases, why it took so long to complete the degree, as one participant explained "all the way through I always had a lot of support and encouragement from my family; I had that no matter what." The marital relationship also provided an important source of support for some. Spouses served as enablers who, by taking on additional responsibilities (usually domestic and parenting), offering advice, encouragement, and persistent prodding, were essential in helping the graduates to stay on course and complete the degree. Speaking of his wife, one man explained:

> *The times that I was disgusted and fed up she would say, "look, you need to go to the library, you need to get this thing done." I would tell her, "Well there is this thing going on at school with the PTA," she would*

tell me, "Don't worry about it, I will handle it. You go on and get the degree."

Relationships with faculty and peers were also important sources of support. The support, interest and advice of faculty were important in reinforcing the students' sense of belonging, academic achievement and, in some cases, professional development. These relationships with faculty are best characterized as dependable sources of support, often with expressions of admiration. Speaking of his advisor, one man explained:

I can say that my advisor was more than just a good scientist; he is a good person. He was one of the best people to work with because of his rapport and the way he treated people. He treated you like a person regardless of what color you were.

Peers also provided supportive relationships. Participants identified some of their colleagues as persons with whom they could talk and share ideas. The peer relationships provided informal opportunities for learning in a "safe" place where they worked out ideas and difficulties. These relationships also provided them with strategies for negotiating the system when difficulties arose. The graduates could also share the more vulnerable

side of themselves in their relationships with their peers. Speaking of his classmates, one male explained:

> *They were the people you could give your papers to and they would read them. It was a support group. That was a good feeling. You were more likely to take a risk; you were more likely to throw out an idea that maybe sounds ridiculous, which is always good.*

A sense of historical connection was discussed by some of the participants. They acknowledged their place in the history of the Black struggle and the influence of their accomplishments on the opportunities for future generations. They spoke of those who went before them and suffered so that they might have the opportunity to obtain the degree. For these participants, leaving without the degree was not an option. They believed, as one participant stated, "My success or failure had implications for more lives than my own." One participant explained the historical significance the degree took on.

> *My mother has a third grade education. She is the product of this oppressive system that has restricted and limited her life options. I had an opportunity even though in many ways I was damaged. There was a lot wrong with the education I received in the public school system in my home state. But at the*

> *same time, I knew I could do this. I was determined to complete it by standing on the shoulder of the African, the slave, the share cropper, the segregated, the resegregated. The sense of being connected to others who came before you.*

The lives of those operating at the optimal identity level reflect the interrelatedness, interdependence, and cooperation of human relations. The individual's sense of self is not self contained, as Myers et al. (1991) explain, "the self is multidimensional, encompassing the ancestors, those yet born, nature and community" (p. 51).

Strong Sense of Self

The participants' strong sense of self was demonstrated in their belief in themselves and their response to issues of race. The doctoral graduates understood the obstacles they would have to overcome as black people occupying spaces that have been traditionally closed to them. One participant explained:

> *Most of the feedback you get is negative in this process; it's feedback about your shortcomings. If you're not careful you find yourself questioning whether or not you are capable and deserving. But, I thought back on my life and I realized that I have always been an achiever, I have always done well, I am somebody and I am worthy. So that*

sense of belief and commitment to working hard and persisting saw me through.

They brought to their graduate school experience a strong internal locus of control relative to race related difficulties. Locus of control refers to an individual's sense of personal control in relationship to their environment (Abatso, 1982). Speaking on issues of race, one participant explained:

> *I never naturally assume that when somebody does something that it's race related, or it is because of race. If anything, I assume that it is not. Because if it is race, it's something I can't control. So, I assume I can control it. From my standpoint when I say that I felt it was racially motivated, I have tried through all of my processes of reasoning to assume that it wasn't.*

Their strong sense of self fueled a determination that helped them to rise above the difficulties of their doctoral studies. Through reflection on their accomplishments and the adversities they had to overcome, they empowered themselves and stayed on course. They were also individuals who understood racism as an impediment in their lives and though they may have felt outrage or pain at the indignities they encountered, they did not allow those

situations to oppress them. Myers explains that those operating at the optimal level "do not react by giving the perpetrator power over them. The perpetrators do not influence their sense of self" (p. 61). They refused to allow the difficulties of race to define their experiences.

Limitations of the Findings

It is the nature of qualitative studies that the findings merely suggest trends in the phenomenon under investigation. This study suggests that race, as well as psychological and social issues are important factors in the experiences of Black doctoral graduates who attended a predominantly White university. It will take several studies of this type of establish the importance of particular factors with any level of certainty.

Reported here are the experiences of advanced graduate students who completed doctoral programs. A study of other populations, for example, persons who did not complete their graduate school programs, would enhance the findings. Hence, this study does not lend itself to generalizations about all Black students in White

academe. It focuses exclusively on the experiences of a specific successful population.

Conclusion

While this study raises unanswered questions about race in the experiences of Black doctoral graduates, it offers insights into the experiences and attitudes of a particular group of Black scholars at one predominantly White university. Despite efforts by the university to recruit Black students, changing the mindset of those Whites resistant to the presence of Blacks on campus was and is a problem. The participants in this study realized that there were those who were not happy about them being there. When faced by resisters, they learned to deal with them in a variety of ways.

While nearly a third of the participants reported race related difficulties, they did not allow the difficulties to become major impediments in their pursuit of the doctorate. They sought to develop their skills as writers, researchers, educators, scientists, leaders and clinicians. Their goals were to make a difference in the quality of their

lives and in the lives of others. It is clear that the doctoral graduates, by and large, recognized the importance of their undertaking to Black people, past, present and in the future. The degree was not theirs alone. They were willing to make the sacrifices, and in some cases, perhaps, temper their egos in order to succeed.

They realized that the university is a setting in which the debate about the intellectual inferiority of their people has not disappeared. They were not moved by such debate; they believed in their abilities. They achieved their academic goals by staying focused. When asked if the struggle of getting the degree was worth it, one African graduate best captured the attitudes of the others:

> *Yes, of course...when you finish and become successful, it's worth it. You have beaten all odds. It has shown me that I can survive in whatever environment I find myself, as long as I remained focused...racism is there, there is nothing you can do about it. Black folks have been fighting all our lives in this country, so there is nothing you can do...You have to remain focused and tell yourself, "I'm here, I plan to stay here and I will succeed!"*

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